

America's Railroads - Jim Crow Era

Ironically, legalizing racial segregation began on America's railroads in a case, Plessy v. Ferguson, that went before the U.S. Supreme Court. On May 18, 1896, the court ruled that the 'separate but equal' clause was constitutional and Supreme Court's ruling advanced legalized racial segregation in the United States. Plessy v. Ferguson was a challenge regarding the interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868). The Amendment did not have the 'separate but equal' clause in it. The amendment, passed in 1868, stated protection under the law. The 'separate but equal' judicial doctrine was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1954, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka case.

Background of Plessy v. Ferguson

1868 14th Amendment to U.S. Constitution

"The Amendment granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States—including former enslaved people—and guaranteed all citizens "equal protection of the laws." One of three amendments passed during the Reconstruction era to abolish slavery and establish civil and legal rights for Black Americans." <history.com>

The Case – Homer Adolph Plessy (1863-1925)

"Homer Plessy, a 30-year-old shoemaker in New Orleans, and on the afternoon of Tuesday, June 7, 1892, he executes it perfectly by walking up to the Press Street Depot, purchasing a first-class ticket on the 4:15 East Louisiana local and taking his seat on board. Nothing about Plessy stands out in the "whites only" car. Had he answered negatively, nothing might have happened (he was seven-eighths Caucasian). However, when train conductor J.J. Dowling asks Plessy what all conductors have been trained to ask under Louisiana's 2-year-old Separate Car Act — "Are you a colored man?" — Plessy answers, "Yes," prompting Dowling to order him to the "colored car." Plessy's refusal to move caused him to be moved forcibly and booked at the Fifth Precinct on Elysian Fields Avenue for violation of the Louisiana Separate Car Act. Plessy's answer started off a chain of events that led the Supreme Court." <pbs.org>

You are encouraged to go to <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/plessy-v-ferguson-who-was-plessy/> to learn more about Mr. Plessy.

The Case – John Howard Ferguson (1838-1915)

"On Nov. 18, 1892, Orleans Parish criminal court Judge John Howard Ferguson, a "carpetbagger" descending from a Martha's Vineyard shipping family, became the "Ferguson" in the case by ruling against Plessy. While Ferguson had dismissed an earlier test case because it involved *inter*-state travel, the federal government's exclusive jurisdiction, in Plessy's *all-in*-state case, the judge ruled that the Separate Cars Act constituted a reasonable use of Louisiana's "police power." "There is no pretense that he [Plessy] was not provided with equal accommodations with the white passengers," Ferguson declared. "He was simply deprived of the liberty of doing as he pleased." A month later, the Louisiana Supreme Court affirmed Ferguson's ruling. Now Plessy's lawyers had what they'd hoped for: an opportunity to argue on a national stage. They filed their appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court on Jan. 5, 1893." <pbs.org>

The Supreme Court Ruling 1896

"From the late 1870s until the triumphs of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s, regimented racial segregation blighted America's water fountains, restrooms, restaurants, lodging, and transportation, along with "separate but equal" schools. All of these were legally sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court (Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896) and codified by so-called Jim Crow laws. It is not clear how Jim Crow, the character that popularized blackface minstrelsy in the 19th century, became associated with these laws, but the use of this symbol says everything about the nature and intention of the laws." <britannica.com>

Who was Jim Crow?

The term 'Jim Crow' stood for the racial segregation and suppressing civil rights among Black Americans. The term was tagged as a post Plessy v. Ferguson. However, the pejorative term was used prior to the Civil War.

"In the early 1830s, the white actor Thomas Dartmouth 'Daddy' Rice was propelled to stardom for performing minstrel routines as the fictional 'Jim Crow,' a caricature of a clumsy, dimwitted Black enslaved man. Rice claimed to have first created the character after witnessing an elderly Black man singing a tune called 'Jump Jim Crow' in Louisville, Kentucky. He later appropriated the Jim Crow persona into a minstrel act where he donned blackface and performed jokes and songs in a stereotypical dialect." <history.com>

Pullman Company

George Mortimer Pullman (1831-1897) was a resourceful engineer and industrialist. After a bad experience during an overnight train ride, he teamed with Benjamin C. Field in 1857 to develop a comfortable sleeping car. The team contracted with the Chicago, Alton, and St. Louis Railroad and converted two railroad cars into sleeper. Field later chose to leave the endeavor to become more involved in politics. <nps.gov>

In 1863, Pullman began producing rail cars that were 'comfortable, clean, and beautiful.' The company became known as the Pullman Palace Car Company. They were costly to build though. His *Pioneer* car alone cost \$18,000. *His company's story-* <https://www.pullman-museum.org/theCompany/>.

Pullman Porter-Jim Crow Era

"Pullman porters were overworked, underpaid and demeaned, but generations of porters on the Pullman Palace Car Company helped promote the rights and futures of African Americans." <history.com>

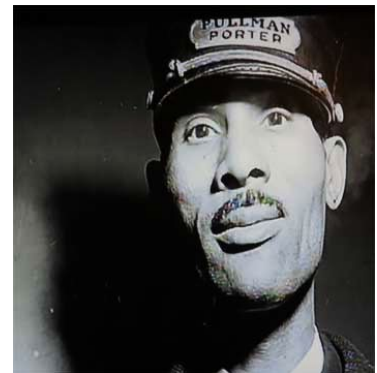
By 1859, railroads in the United States were expanding their use throughout the country.

"The first Pullman porter began working aboard the sleeper cars around 1867...specially trained conductors were white, Pullman recruited only Black men, many former slaves in the South, to work as porters. Their job was to lug baggage, shine shoes, set up and clean the sleeping berths and serve passengers." <history.com>

"George Pullman was open about his reasons for hiring Negro porters: He reasoned that former slaves would know best how to cater to his customers' every whim, and they would work long hours for cheap wages. He also thought that Black porters (especially those with darker skin) would be more invisible to his white upper- and middle-class passengers, making it easier for them to feel comfortable during their journey." <history.com>

"But despite the undeniable racism behind Pullman's employment practices, he ended up giving advantages to people who desperately needed them. In the early 1900s, a time when many other businesses wouldn't hire African Americans, the Pullman Company became the largest single employer of Black men in the country." <history.com>

"Working as a Pullman porter became a coveted job, even a career, and many brothers, sons and grandsons of porters followed in their footsteps. Porters were paid more than what many other Black workers made at the time, and the work was not backbreaking, when compared to field labor. More importantly, they got to travel the country, at a time when this was unthinkable for the vast majority of Black Americans." <history.com>



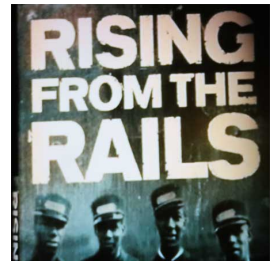
After Pullman's death the company reorganized. The name changed to the Pullman Company. A Pullman porter's life continued with prejudice and disrespect. For instance, many passengers called porters 'boy' or 'George' after the company's founder. Porters worked up to 400 hours per month with little off-time. They were salaried but paid the lower than of other train employees. Tipping was built into their pay scale but were not allowed to solicit tips. The facial expression and reputation of 'grinning Uncle Toms' became a method to improve the porter's ability to garner a tip.

<history.com>

Unionization of railroad workers took place during the mid-1890s, but Black workers were not included. A. Philip Randolph formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925. This attempt was not accepted by the Pullman Company until over ten years later. Better wages and shorter hours of work came with an agreement in 1937. <history.com>

Civil rights for Black Americans from a federal standpoint did not take place until the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The legacy of Pullman Porters had an impact on economic, social, and cultural areas of their lives. "Pullman porters were able to clearly see the differences between the lives of wealthier white Americans and their own. Armed with this knowledge, many porters saved up money to send their children and grandchildren through college and graduate school, giving them the education and opportunities, they hadn't had themselves." <history.com>

This photo program shares some of the photos in the Pullman Company car exhibit.



Documentary produced 2006

White seating (left) vs Colored Section (right) on a Train



Waiting Room in Train Station-Colored Only



"Savvy Porters"

Racism complicated relationships on trains. During the 1920s conductors and passengers insisted that a doctrine of white racial superiority was true. The sleeping cars and dining cars were also segregated for the passengers.

Sleeping car porters and maids enjoyed the geographic freedom the trains provided. Traveling thousands of miles annually, African American porters and maids served the passengers on the trains. Everything was segregated, including dining cars. The end of the line often meant that African American train employees had nowhere to eat or sleep. Old sleeping cars were turned into dormitories.

"They had a partition that would come down all the way and almost blind two tables. These two tables were for colored who were dining. There are usually forty-eight seats for diners, but only eight seats for colored."



Below are 8 porters who accompanied President Franklin Delano Roosevelt for 12 years.



Sources: <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm>, <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>, <https://www.history.com/news/was-jim-crow-a-real-person>, <https://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/a-brief-history-of-jim-crow>, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-the-origin-of-the-term-jim-crow>, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fourteenth-amendment>, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/plessy-v-ferguson-who-was-plessy/>, <https://www.pullman-museum.org/theCompany/>, <https://www.nps.gov/people/george-m-pullman.htm>, and <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/pullman-porters>.

7-part series on the [Gold Coast Railroad](http://acuri.net-florida) is at acuri.net-florida

acuri.net John R. Vincenti Gold Coast Railroad Museum – Jim Crow Era

Did You Know?

Virginia was the first state to pass legislation approving separate coach cars in 1900. Shortly after, the Florida Land Boom overwhelmed business for Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Tracks. The SAL Railroad used the opportunity to begin making stations coming down from West Palm Beach. By 1927, SAL had reached Miami and Homestead.



A. Philip Randolph, founder of first black labor union.
(Florida Photographic Collection)

African American firemen and trainmen earned about 10 to 20 percent less than whites.